



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

December 22, 2013

"Incredible Power of Love" - Matthew 2:1-12

The Rev. Dr. Sim Fulcher

It may sound weird, but there was a strange sense of hope throughout the habitable world when Jesus was born. Historians of that time recorded this hope as a mysterious feeling of expectation—like the world was waiting for a good, wise, and powerful king.

You wonder if the spirit of sadness that seemed to pervade the entire universe at the death of Jesus, was not at His birth a kind of pervasive gladness. It was as if the cosmos was anticipating an event like no other—God becoming human flesh.

Virgil, the Roman poet who died just a few years before Christ's birth, was among those who had this hope. He referred to it as "the golden days that were coming." Little wonder, then, that those who studied the stars to unlock the future would be looking for some sign that would give them a lead.

Studying the stars for meaning was the science of that day. Those who did it were scholars and their skills were respected in the Greco-Roman world. They were recognized as the scientists of the east and known officially as "Magi".

There have been some students of the Bible who say the Magi incident never happened, that it was a Hollywood-like

touch-up by Matthew to embellish the dramatic nature of the scene—just a lovely legend.

The legend idea has no grounds according to responsible scholars. The legend idea was probably a human attempt to clean up this scene polluted by these wise men who were into astrology. And that's what the Magi were. They were astrologists. And scripture is clear about astrology being off-limits. Hear these words from the prophet Isaiah:

"Let your astrologers come forward, those stargazers who make predictions month by month...these you have labored with and [dealt] with since childhood. Each of them goes on in his error; there is not one that can save you." (Isaiah 47:13-15 NIV).

Nevertheless our passage is true as written. The wise men, the astrologers, came from the east, found the baby Jesus, kneeled before Him as king, and gave Him their gifts. They gave Him the best that they had. It's a true story.

But the wise men do mess things up. They mess up our nativity scenes big time. To begin with there were probably a whole bunch of wise men, not just three. And they found Jesus weeks or months after He was born. From the passage, we read Jesus was in

a house when they found Him. Most students of the Bible say Jesus was two years old when they found Him. Further, Jesus was probably not born in a barn or wooden stable.

When Mimi and I traveled with a group to the Holy land and to Bethlehem we went to the Church of the Nativity. The place they had marked where they said Jesus was born was way down at the bottom of some steps in sort of a cave. It was a stable, but it was probably a cave.

We do know some things for sure—things that are clearly recorded. There was a manger—a food trough for animals. It was turned into a crib and the baby Jesus in it was wrapped in sort of a blanket. His mom was there. We know this. We know that there were shepherds and, no doubt, sheep all around. We know it was night, both when the shepherds came and later when the wise men came. We know there was a star and that it all took place in Bethlehem.

But, you know, our nativity scenes are not meant to be accurate renditions of Jesus' birth. A manger scene is symbolic. It tells a story—a beautiful story.

At our house we like manger scenes. I said there were probably more than three wise men? What about two?!

That creative thought came last year when our dog ate one of the wise men from our antique manger scene. It didn't change the story one bit.

That antique, our oldest, is from Germany. Our most beautiful nativity set is from Jerusalem—made of olive wood from the Holy Land. We bought it when we were there.

Our most nostalgic manger scene is the one our children used to put together every Christmas. Now, their children are older than they were when they put it together.

But the most famous manger scene of all was from Sears. It no longer exists, but I feel the urging of the Spirit to tell you the story.....again.

We called our manger scene Mary and Joe. This was an endearing term, used with the utmost respect. Mary and Joe took on a life of their own through the years. So much so that Mimi began to secretly pray that something would happen to them. Just before we moved to Honolulu, her prayers were answered.

Mary and Joe came into being when we were living in Florida. I bought them from Sears—Mary, Joseph, a cow, two sheep, a donkey, a shepherd, and a wise man. As I recall the deluxe set had three wise men, but we weren't able to go deluxe.

And, of course, there was the baby Jesus in a wooden manger. All the figures were translucent plastic with light bulbs inside. I'm sure you've seen this type or maybe you own some like them.

They were large, but not life-size. Our son who was four could impersonate Joseph. He would get down on one knee by the baby Jesus, just like Joseph, and you couldn't tell him from the real thing—except, of course, for the light bulb inside.

The second year I embellished the whole scene with a tear-down-fold-up wooden frame that was the stable. We moved to Kentucky in March but I still remember thinking, as we drove off the expressway to our new home, that "come Christmas Mary and Joe are gonna' get some real hay from one of these horse farms." They did. I scrounged some hay from a farm that year. Each year after that I bought a whole bail of hay. So now, each year, the scene had a fresh hay-thatched roof plus a foot of hay on the heavy wooden floor I made for the whole thing to sit on.

We lived high on a hill on an acre of land. It was a long front yard that sloped sharply down from the house to the street. The manger scene sat squarely in the center of the yard among a lot of tall trees.

By using a long section ladder up against the tallest tree I attached a 150-watt GE spotlight high up in the tree. This was the Christmas star. I stretched about 100 feet of electrical cord from the star to a security light on the corner of the house. I could now switch the star on each night from inside the house which, of course, I didn't do until it got very close to Christmas Eve. I wanted to be biblical.

It was all very effective—at least in my opinion. I wanted to put loud speakers in the trees—hidden of course—and play

Christmas music for all the neighborhood to enjoy. Mimi was against it. On hindsight, she was what you could call a wise-woman.

I know it all sounds cheesy and tacky, but the scene didn't look too bad. People would even stop on occasion and come up into the yard and take photos of their children sitting in the hay with the animals. Sometimes our cocker spaniel, not our present cocker, would sit in with Mary and Joe. She blended right in. She was the same color as the hay.

About five years ago, a neighbor from those days sent us a coaster made from one of the trees where I had the spotlight attached. The coaster came with a note that said:

"Dear Mimi and Sim. Here's a little memory of the Nativity Scene—this coaster was made from a limb of the tree that stood behind [it]. The trees were uprooted by the terrible ice storm we had here. The area is cleared now and you'd never know that a tree had been there — but I have a photograph of [your manger] scene at my front door. . . . There are a lot of new families in the neighborhood and I'm sorry their little children never got to see the manger scene. Signed, Lucy."

Mimi did like the manger scene. She just didn't like all the time it took to set it up each year. With all the Christmas activities at the church, the only time I had was very late at night. That time often extended into the wee hours of the morning—especially after the cow wandered off.

It's true! One morning when we awoke the cow was gone. I put up signs all around the neighborhood: "Lost cow. Please return. No questions asked."

The response was they took the donkey, too! This was all very strange because the neighborhood was known to be an unusually secure neighborhood.

So the next year I had to buy a new cow and a new donkey. They weren't as good as the old ones. The donkey was bigger than the cow, but true art is forgiving. And I tied them down this time with stakes in the ground and ropes attached.

It takes a long time to do all that so I didn't tie down the sheep. Big mistake. It took just one night and the sheep was gone. That was the day I declared war. You don't mess with my sheep!

I was up almost all the next night burglar proofing the whole thing. And it worked. There was evidence that someone had made a failed attempt to steal baby Jesus one night, but no more attempts—that is, until the following year.

What turned out to be that final and fateful year, I determined I would be ready for whatever might come. I worked from dinner to almost sun up. But you have to do what you have to do.

I bored a quarter inch hole all the way through each figure. It made the worn and frazzled figures look even more pitiful. Through the years, Mary had lost her bottom and Joseph was one-third duct tape. The acrylic paint I used to repaint them several times was flaking off.

In spite of all this our neighbors across the street still said that our manger scene sitting silently way up on our hill,

lighting up that little spot on a cold, dark, winter night made a statement to their family of the real meaning of Christmas.

Their children actually said that it was their favorite part of Christmas—that Christmas didn't start for them until they would wake up while it was still dark, look out their bedroom window, and see Mary and Joe and the baby Jesus glowing in the dark.

Well, back to business. Through that quarter inch hole I ran a heavy plastic coated steel cable through each of the eight figures including the manger and all the stable parts. I bought an anchor and screwed it nearly three feet into the ground. It was a heavy steel corkscrew anchor—the kind they use at airports to tie down light planes in stormy conditions.

The top of the anchor was buried out of sight, and I attached the cable to the anchor with lock screws. I covered it all with hay.

It all looked very innocent—but I was ready!

I had seriously considered digging a huge pit and camouflaging it with hay so that the thieves would fall into the pit and be trapped. I think I really would have done it, but the Kentucky ground is too hard for digging in the winter time—at least for the size hole I felt I needed.

The first night was uneventful. It all happened about the third night, a week before Christmas. The star had not been turned on. It was close to 9 o'clock. Mimi was sitting in the living room. I was walking into the living room from our bedroom. We suddenly heard one of the weirdest, loudest

noises we had ever heard or probably ever will hear. It sounded like a crash, but it was definitely not a car crash. It came from the front yard. Ironically as the familiar story goes:

When out on the lawn there rose such a clatter

I sprang from the bedroom to see what was the matter.

Away to the window I flew like a flash,

Tore open the curtain and looked through the sash.

When what to my wondering eyes should appear

But a getaway car with a driver so quick

It drove out of sight—and it wasn't Saint Nick.

As the car sped away I saw no trace of the manger scene. It was all gone. Or was it?! No! It was all there—the miniature stable and eight tiny figures strewn 100 feet from the top of our yard to the bottom.

Everything was totally flattened, but it was still there—all attached to my trusty steel cable.

I exclaimed to Mimi, "It's the manger scene! They've destroyed my manger scene!" Mimi literally jumped up from her chair and yelled, "Hallelujah!"

It was another long night, that night. I was determined to put it all back together as if nothing had happened. I was thinking, "That'll show those guys when they drive back by here tomorrow."

And I did put it all back together. It took a whole roll of duct tape and I don't know how many hours, but by early morning it looked the same as always—very, very fragile you could blow it over—but looked the same.

Before the next night I added a new feature. I bought a large roll of very thin black plastic landscape netting—ten feet wide. I stretched it ten feet high and nailed it onto all the trees surrounding the manger scene and anchored it into the ground. So now the manger scene was enclosed in a huge circle—a full 360 degrees within in an invisible ten-foot plastic fence.

I was now hoping they WOULD come back again. I wanted them to come and run into the net and go “Boyng! Boyng!” and then get hung in the net. That would teach ‘em!

Then I began planning how I could affix my double barreled shotgun to a tree—aimed up to the sky, or course, but with a string running from baby Jesus to the first trigger and another string from the manger to the second trigger.

Or maybe a string from the netting to the triggers, and I could camp out behind a tree and watch them go, “Boyng! Boyng! Boom! Boom!”

It was about then that the Holy Spirit began to speak softly to my spirit which was not so holy at that moment. Something was wrong with this Christmas picture. My spirit had become like that of the thieves. I was becoming a grinch.

So I reformed in my spirit and enjoyed the rest of that season in the true spirit of Christmas. Mary and Joe, the baby Jesus, and the rest of the nativity gang went through the rest of the holiday season untouched.

I saw the manger scene gang for the last time six months later—or at least what was left of them.

They were very beat up. I really should have just thrown them away, but I didn’t have the heart. They were sitting in the Salvation Army pick-up closet with other stuff we unloaded in preparation for our move to Hawaii.

Every now and then here in Hawaii at Christmas time I look longingly out on our front yard—now very small. And Mimi reads my mind. She says, “Don’t you dare!”

I said the manger scene is symbolic, and it is. But what does it say? What does it say to you?

The manger scene at its finest says a lot to me. I can't really express it but maybe this will help: You remember that copper mine in Chile that caved in and trapped all those men? It was a little over three years ago. On the fifth of August a copper mine in Northern Chile collapsed trapping 33 men nearly a half mile underground.

They remained underground a record 69 days when they were all finally rescued and in relatively good health. 69 days! But the number that sticks with me is the number 17. They went 17 days without a peep from above! Can you imagine?!

It was dark, hot and humid. They rationed the light from their dim headlamps as they did the food. They tried desperately to reach the surface through old abandoned mine shafts, but they too had all collapsed with the cave-in. Day after day went by. Some began to lose hope. A week went by. They felt probably all rescue attempts would now be abandoned.

Then another week went by. The rationed food was gone and

so was almost all hope. One miner set up a chapel for prayer. Probably, he alone kept the spark of hope alive.

Then on August 22nd, the 17th day after the cave-in, the men looked up as they heard a faint noise. The sound got closer and closer, louder and louder. Suddenly a small drill hammer broke through the surface into the tunnel where they were trapped. A small hole one-half mile long had been drilled into the tunnel from above.

No words can express the emotions of the men at that moment. They weren’t rescued yet, but the promise was there. They had not been abandoned. They had not been left alone in darkness and despair. There was hope. They knew there were loving caring people up there who at great cost had sent this breakthrough.

And it was at great cost. It was called a global effort. Almost every continent in the world was represented. Twelve international drilling teams were on hand working together. NASA was there. Millions upon millions of dollars were poured into the effort. A small city was created at the mine's entrance called “Camp Hope”. There were 1,300 news reporters alone. Eventually when the men were rescued every car horn in Chile was sounded at once.

That's what the manger scene says to me. It's a symbol that says God has not abandoned us. To that tiny baby in that manger in the darkness "the hopes and fears of all the years are met in Thee tonight." The rescue hasn't happened yet. There's much more to the story.

But that little bundle in a blanket represents the hope and the promise, and testifies to the incredible power of the love of God in Heaven above.

The human race has tried to reach up to God, to get out of the darkness that threatens to engulf us but all the mineshafts, all the religious avenues and attempts—no matter how robust and sincere—have collapsed along with the cave-in. Our only hope is from above. And good news! God has not left us alone. Again I go to Isaiah, the prophet of hope:

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned . . . For unto us a Child is born, To us a Son is given, And the government shall be upon His shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful counselor, Mighty God., Everlasting Father, Prince of peace. (Isaiah 9:2-3,6 NIV)

My wife, who has a knack for putting things succinctly, says it this way: "God poked a hole and the light came through." And that light is Jesus—The Light of the World!

A powerful act of love elicits a response. When that drill hammer was retracted from the tunnel the people crowded around because there were two things attached to the end of it—attached with rubber bands. They were both from the oldest miner, Mario Gomez, who represented the 32 others.

One item was a scribbled note that said in essence, "We are all well." The other item was a personal item from Gomez. It was letter—a love letter to his wife.

The way I see it, Gomez, grateful for this action from above—knowing at what cost it must have come—sent back the best that he had. He sent back his heart—the letter being the hard copy of that act. When he finally was rescued Gomez immediately fell to his knees and worshipped God.

The wise men did that, too. Overcome they kneeled and worshipped Jesus. They gave Jesus the best that they had—outwardly and inwardly. Jesus had their hearts. I love it that these Wise Men were astrologers and Gentile and pagan—totally out of bounds. I love it because it sends a beautiful message to all of us. It means if you seek God with your heart, He will meet you wherever you are...as you are.

So no matter who you are, where you're coming from, what you've done or haven't done, you only have to give Him the best that you have and He will always accept it. It may be difficult, but it's simple. You only have to give Him your heart. You can do it right now—God's blessings if you just did it.

In Florida where I served in a church, a young woman named Linda was walking in darkness and sinking deeper and deeper. One day through our church's ministry she got a glimpse of Jesus—who He was, what He came to do. She longed to come to Him—drawn by His incredible love—but she felt so unworthy. Later, when she told her story publicly, she said it this way: "The finest I had to give Jesus was a broken heart, but He took it and He gave me a new one."

Let's pray. Lord Jesus, King of Kings and Lord of Lords. You

deserve our finest whatever it is. Give us grace to lay it before You even as does the Little Drummer Boy. Amen.

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